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Museums for Cobb, Jackson honor game's flawed giants

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Greenville, S.C. -- It seems fitting that two of baseball's greatest players, who played at the same time and who left with tarnished images, have museums just 60 miles apart.

Consider baseball's past as we near the start of the playoffs on Wednesday. For a fan of the game's history, any trip through the Southeast should include a stop at museums honoring Joe Jackson in Greenville, S.C., and Ty Cobb in Royston, Ga.

The pair of museums preserve the careers and history of two Southern-born and -raised men, who rose to greatness on baseball diamonds in the industrial cities of the North. Born less than three years apart, they played at a time with colorful nicknames ("Shoeless Joe," "The Georgia Peach") and finished with names etched repeatedly in record books.

They hold two of the three highest lifetime batting averages.

The Shoeless Joe Jackson Museum fills a neat house next to Fluor Field in Greenville, in western South Carolina. The house offers a tidy tribute to the man who remains on the outside looking in to the Hall of Fame, despite his .356 average.

(When it opened in 2008, the museum's address was calculated to match his lifetime average - a nice touch.)

Jackson was accused of throwing games in the 1919 World Series when he played for the Chicago White Sox, an accusation that never landed him in prison but did bring banishment from the game he loved.

One of the ways Jackson's memory has been preserved is the home itself. The house was moved several miles to its current location and opened as a museum in 2008. It's where Jackson and his wife retired to and lived until he died in 1951.

Jackson grew up working in textile mills and playing ball for the mills' teams, a history that is reflected wonderfully in photographs and through knowledgeable guides of the museum, which keeps the feel of an old home.

Wandering through the home/museum, you'll learn of Jackson, the man, who was born poor, remained illiterate but not dumb, and became a liquor-store owner after baseball. Jackson the player has a colorful history - "Shoeless Joe" because he hit a triple in a game where he had shed his shoes because of blisters. He named his bat "Black Betsy" and brought it South in the winter.

"Bats don't like to freeze no more than me," Jackson once said. He knew Northern winters, having spent most of his career in Chicago and Cleveland.

Museum organizers have done a nice job of chronicling Jackson's Major League career, 1908 to 1920. Documents and artifacts are displayed throughout the home, coexisting with neatly kept furniture and

orderly rooms.

One small room has been converted into a baseball library (reference browsing but no checking out). One room focuses on his time in Chicago, while other displays highlight his years at Cleveland's League Park (which celebrates its own history next year, marking 100 years).

If ever there were a time to see this museum, it's now - the 90th anniversary of the famed "Black Sox" scandal, denoting baseball's lowest point before the recent steroid debacle. Jackson and several players reportedly took money to fix the series. The numbers back up Jackson; he hit .375 in the 1919 World Series and never made an error. Waves of support come and go over the years to get Jackson into the Hall of Fame, and the League Park Society is one such organization supporting Jackson's induction.

Jackson died not bitter but resolved. "I'm willing to let the Lord be my judge," he told sports columnist Furman Bisher in an interview in 1949 at the home.

Cobb was

hard to love

The Lord isn't the only one judging Cobb. The fierce competitor known for his relentless play on the field and aggressiveness off of it drew detractors over the years - players and fans alike. As often as Cobb's .367 lifetime average - still the game's best - is mentioned, so are stories of his spiking, his fights, his racism.

But beyond that there is a businessman who invested wisely, enough to help fund a hospital and scholarships, and a man who had a soft spot for children.

The museum is in tiny Royston, about 100 miles northeast of Atlanta, on the first floor of an office building that is part of the hospital system that Cobb helped found in 1950.

A theater includes a well-done documentary on Cobb, who once led the league in home runs for Detroit (nine, in 1909). Pictures, baseballs and artifacts are displayed. Information on his money is interesting; the financially astute Cobb invested early in Coca-Cola. An especially nice gem comes in personal letters written to Cobb from fans.

Neither museum offers an unvarnished look at either man. It doesn't matter; both maintain a part of baseball history of two deserving players.

Recommended: For year-by-year statistical results on each player, go to baseball-reference.com. For more on the Black Sox scandal, read Eliot Asinof's "Eight Men Out." For more on Cobb, read Al Stump's "Ty Cobb."

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